

4. A few Rough Notes on the Aye-aye.

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[Received January 23, 1883.]

This curious animal, the *Chiromys madagascariensis*, has evidently been named from the exclamations of the people who first saw it, and who, upon first sight of any thing so peculiar, would naturally utter the usual Malagasy exclamation of surprise, Hay! Hay! And at the present time among the people it is called the Haihay (pronounced Hayehaye).

Being a nocturnal animal, it is very difficult to get any reliable information concerning its habits in the wild state, and native reports are altogether contradictory with respect to these matters. Even with reference to its natural food no satisfactory explanation can be obtained from the people. Many assert positively that it lives on honey; but one I had in captivity for several months would not eat honey in any form, either strained or in the comb, or mixed with various things I thought he might have a fancy for. Others say it lives on fruits and leaves; others that birds and eggs are its natural food. I fancy from what I saw of my captive that both these conjectures are nearer the truth; for after a few days, during which it would eat nothing, and it was thought that the proper food had not been offered (but it was in reality pining or sulking), it took several fruits which I was able to procure for it. It liked bananas; but it made sorry efforts at eating them, its teeth being so placed that its mouth was frequently clogged with them. The small fruits of various native shrubs it also devoured, as also rice boiled in milk and sweetened with sugar; but meat, larvæ, moths, beetles, and eggs it would not touch. But I noticed that when I came near its cage with a light, it almost invariably started and went for a little distance in chase of the shadow cast by the pieces of banana attached to the wire-work in the front of its cage; and I think that if I could have procured some small birds it would have, if not devoured them, at any rate killed them for their blood, as some Lemurs are known to do¹. It drank water occasionally, but in such a way as to make it highly probable that it does not drink from streams or pools in the ordinary way. It did not hold its food in its hands as the Lemurs which I have had in captivity have done, but merely used its hands to steady it on the bottom of the cage. But whenever it had eaten, although it did not always clean its hands, it invariably drew each of its long claws through its mouth,

¹ In proof of this, I need only instance one fact seen by several persons. A vessel under Captain Lassen was sailing along the coast between here and Imahanore in the south, when, after a stormy morning, two land-birds, which had apparently been driven from shore and were exhausted, settled in the afternoon on one of the yards. A tame Lemur (*Lemur albifrons*) on board saw the birds alight, and crept up to them, seizing and killing them immediately, but after having sucked the blood let them fall upon the deck.

as though, in the natural state, these had taken a chief part in procuring the food.

In some accounts, given by different writers, the Hailhay is said to be easily tamed, and to be inoffensive. For instance, Sounerat, who kept two in captivity, described it as "timid, inoffensive, and slow in its movements, in these respects resembling the Lories." In each of these qualities, except the "timidity," I have found, both from native accounts and from the specimen I have kept, that exactly the reverse is the case. It is very savage, and, when attacking, strikes with its hands with anything but a slow movement. As might be imagined in a nocturnal animal, its movements in the daytime are slow and uncertain; and it may be said to be inoffensive then.

When it bit at the wire netting in the front of its cage, I noticed that each of the pair of incisors in either jaw could separate sufficiently to admit the thick wire even down to the gum, the tips of the teeth then standing a considerable distance apart, leading to the supposition that, by some arrangement of the sockets of the teeth, they could be moved so far without breaking off. The Haihay brings forth one at a birth, in which the long claw is fully developed.

It is no wonder that in connection with so curious an animal a number of superstitious beliefs should be current among the Bétsimisáraka, in whose country the Haihay is principally found. In reference to its name, one account says that the first discoverers took it from one part of the island to another, the inhabitants of which had never seen it, and in their surprise they exclaimed Hay! Hay! Another tale is that many years ago some Bétsimisáraka had occasion to open an old tomb in which had been buried one of their ancestors. No sooner was the tomb opened than an animal into which the said ancestor had developed sprang out, and hence the exclamation of surprise that has attached itself as a name to this creature. Many of the Bétsimisáraka still believe that the Haihay is the embodiment of their forefathers, and hence will not touch it, much less do it an injury. It is said that when one is discovered dead in the forest, these people make a tomb for it and bury it with all the formality of a funeral. They think that if they attempt to catch it they will surely die in consequence; and when I have said to them, "But there is so-and-so who has brought several into Tamatave, and nothing has happened to him," the answer has been, "Yes! but he has its charm" (that is, the charm which counteracts the evil consequences of the act). The superstition extends even to the nest which the animal makes for itself. If a man receives from another, or picks up accidentally the portion on which the head of the Haihay has rested, it is sure to bring good fortune; while the receiving of that part on which its feet rested is followed by bad luck or death. This has even passed into a proverb among the Bétsimisáraka.